

Examining U.S. Positions on the Taiwan Issue: from Obama-Hu Summit

由「歐胡會」檢測美國之臺灣問題立場

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I. Introduction

U.S. President Barack Obama just concluded his trip to Japan, China, Singapore, and South Korea. Among his four Asian stops, China could be considered the most crucial. Earlier, Obama and Chinese President Hu Jintao met in early April during the G-20 Summit in London, in late September in New York for UN meetings and in Pittsburg again for the G-20 Summit. However, this marked the U.S. president's first time to stand on Chinese soil. Observing the Obama-Hu summit, the world has focused on the two countries' positions on human rights, Tibet, the Dalai Lama, Taiwan, Reminbi exchange rates, the dollar's status, bilateral trade disputes, and other major issues that the two countries remain wide apart on. Also of great concern are the other global and regional issues, such as anti-terrorism, nuclear threats and proliferation, the international financial crisis, climate change and global warming, Iran and North Korea, and issues for which "standing together is in mutual interests, and standing apart jeopardizes both sides." However, Taipei's major concern is the two countries' attitude on the Taiwan issue, which can only be examined from the U.S.-China Joint Statement, issued on November 17 by the two leaders, and their joint press conference. The previous US-China joint

statement was signed 12 years ago, in October 1997, by then Chinese President Jiang Zemin and former U.S. President Bill Clinton during Jiang's trip to the United States.

II. U.S. and China's Positions on the Taiwan Issue

First, regarding the one China issue, in the Part II entitled "Building and Deepening Bilateral Strategic Trust" of the U.S.-China Joint Statement signed by the two leaders on November 17, the Chinese side emphasized that "The Taiwan issue concerns China's sovereignty and territorial integrity;" and the U.S. side stated that it "follows its one-China policy and abides by the three U.S.-China Joint Communiqués." The wording "its one-China policy" means that Washington intends to follow its own, not China's, one-China policy, with a clear note to distinguish itself from Beijing's consistent rhetoric and a strong implication that Washington retains its own interpretation of its policy. Conversely, Hu told the joint press conference that "President Obama on various occasions has reiterated that the U.S. side adheres to the one-China policy, abides by the three Sino-U.S. Joint communiqués, and respects China's sovereignty and the territorial integrity when it comes to the Taiwan question and other matters." The only difference is that unlike Beijing's traditional reference to the "one China principle," Hu adapted to the American wording of a "one China policy" this time instead of the "one-China principle."

Second, the Taiwan media and the general public noted that in the town hall talk with Chinese students in Shanghai on November 16, Obama did not mention the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), and nor did he

in the U.S.-China Joint Statement on the following day. On these two occasions, the U.S. president only mentioned the three U.S.-China Joint Communiqués. These two omissions triggered worries about a rollback in Washington-Taipei relations. However, from another perspective, the town hall talk was meant to be an unofficial occasion, therefore an inappropriate occasion to announce or reiterate the American policy baseline. Also, the 1997 U.S.-China Joint Statement did not mention the TRA either. Nevertheless, Obama selectively used the joint press conference, where Hu was present, to bring up the TRA. Obama said, “Our own policy, based on the three U.S.-China communiqués and the TRA, supports the further development of these ties – ties that are in the interest of both sides, as well as the broader region and the U.S.” Former AIT Chairman of the Board and Managing Director Richard Bush, in an interview with Taiwan’s Central News Agency, said that the United States never mentioned the TRA in previous joint statements. Bush believed that Obama mentioned the TRA in an appropriate manner and on an expected occasion; Bush was not surprised by this arrangement, adding that he believed there is no change in U.S.-Taiwan relations.

Third, notably, Obama mentioned in the joint press conference that “the U.S. respects the sovereignty and territorial integrity of China,” which was also emphasized in the U.S.-China Joint Statement in the form of mutual consensus -- “The two countries reiterated that the fundamental principle of respect for each other’s sovereignty and territorial integrity is at the core of the three US-China Joint communiqués, which guides the U.S.-China relations.” A number of observers considered this a rare practice in recent years, because a reference to the insistence on

“sovereignty and territorial integrity” has been Beijing’s traditional practice, and Washington has always hoped for not concurring. Despite this, a similar wording dates back to the 1982 U.S.-China August 17 Communiqué -- “Respect for each other’s sovereignty and territorial integrity and non-interference in each other’s internal affairs constitute the fundamental principles guiding United States-China relations.” Technically speaking, Washington’s reference this time cannot be considered unprecedented.

Fourth, Washington traditionally said it is glad to see the two sides of the Taiwan Strait engage in bilateral dialogue to reduce tensions, normally without specifying it to be cross-strait political dialogue. However, in the U.S.-China Joint Statement, the U.S. side clearly said, “The U.S. welcomes the peaceful development of relations across the Taiwan Strait and look forward to efforts by both sides to increase dialogues and interactions in economic, political, and other fields, and develop more positive and stable cross-strait relations.” The wordings, though expressively mentioned cross-strait political dialogue, do not refer to any cross-strait agreements, such as a peace accord; the reference might include any general or comprehensive dialogue on various subjects that may contribute to stability in the Taiwan Strait. James Steinberg, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State, mentioned in his speech, titled “The Administration’s Vision of the U.S.-China Relationship” delivered to the Center for A New American Security on September 24, for the first time a hope for Taipei to explore a confidence-building mechanism with Beijing in order to stabilize cross-strait relations. “Political dialogue” is an ambiguous term and particularly sensitive, given Taiwan’s domestic politics

today. Taipei has mentioned more than once that it is not an opportune moment to kick off a cross-strait political dialogue. Therefore, against this background, Obama's reference led to some worries that his administration has been leaning toward Beijing stand.

III. Washington's Arms Sale to Taiwan

Undoubtedly, Washington's arms sales to Taiwan have been a barometer of U.S.-Taiwan bilateral relations. Though never shy in trying to thwart and influencing U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, Beijing has put further pressures on this issue on Washington at the current stage. For example, the Chinese Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission, Xu Caihou, made it clear during a meeting in late October with U.S. Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates that Washington's sale of either F-16CD or any other weapons will bring about a strong reaction from Beijing. Xu added that any improper handling of this issue by the Obama administration will severely jeopardize bilateral relations. Wang Yi, Chinese minister of the Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council, noted during his June trip to the United States that while U.S.-China relations are improving drastically, Washington should stop arms sales to Taiwan.

For Beijing, a successful thwart of Washington's sales of F-16CDs to Taiwan would be a significant and surprising diplomatic victory. If it cannot thwart the sale, Beijing stills hopes to delay such a sale through its constant pressure on Washington. Another issue to watch is that at a time when cross-strait relations are warming up, Beijing will not only highlight the justification for no more U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, but also ask Taipei to stop buying U.S. arms through pushing cross-strait

confidence- and security-building measures.

In Washington, before the president's Asian trip, American ranking officials on national security and foreign affairs disclosed important policy messages during events hosted by think tanks or during media interviews. In an event hosted by the Center for American Progress on November 8, while responding to questions, Steinberg reiterated that the Obama administration will abide by the TRA and provide adequate weapons in line with Taiwan's defense needs. He said that despite likely unpleasant reactions from Beijing, Washington will still do so, which is not only obliged under the TRA, but also is a thing that should be done. However, Steinberg did not specifically address the arms sales of the F-16CDs to Taiwan. On the same day, Jeffrey Bader, the Senior Director for East Asian Affairs at the National Security Council, in an event hosted by the Brookings Institution, said that the Obama administration's arms sales policy to Taiwan will remain consistent and unchanged from previous administrations. In Manila, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton on November 13 was asked by a reporter of the Voice of America whether Washington will gradually reduce arms sales to Taiwan. She said that Washington will inform Beijing that it will provide defensive weapons to Taiwan on an as-needed basis. Right after the Obama-Hu summit, Bader told the media that Obama mentioned clearly to Hu that Washington will remain unchanged in its arms sales policy to Taiwan and will "do whatever necessary in that respect."

IV. Conclusion

In summary, before Obama's Asian trip, many international media

and observers had predicted that Washington and Beijing would reiterate their respective positions, and that there would be no great surprises. Afterwards, Obama's reiterated U.S. positions in the joint press conference, saying that the U.S. will abide by the three U.S.-China joint communiqués and the TRA -- an indication that Washington's position on the Taiwan issue and relations with Taipei did not show any basic change. However, Taipei should pay attention to Washington's hope for a cross-strait political dialogue, which might carry subtle implications.

In fact, before Obama's visit, Bader indicated in a Brookings Institution event that the three U.S.-China joint communiqués and the TRA have constituted a framework where the Taiwan status issue has been thoroughly addressed. Bader emphasized that Obama would not touch upon this area during the president's China visits, that U.S. policies remain unchanged, and that Washington has no intention to break into this already tested domain. After Obama's trip, moreover, AIT Chairman Raymond Burghardt visited Taiwan to reassure Taipei that the TRA remains the guiding document governing relations between the two countries and U.S. policy on Taiwan remained unchanged, including its position on Taiwan's sovereignty and commitment to assist Taiwan to meet its defense need.

From Taiwan's perspective, actually, a three-win situation, where the triangle relations, namely the Washington-Beijing ties, cross-strait relations, and Washington-Taipei ties, remain stable and positive will best meet Taiwan's strategic interests. Washington-Taipei relations have been the center of the gravity of Taiwan's foreign relations, having a

high-degree of symbolic and substantive significance, both politically and in the sense of national security. Therefore, Taipei should pay extremely close attention to Washington's Taiwan policy shift, if any, after the Obama-Hu summit with high vigilance and no negligence. This is particularly true at a time when Washington desperately needs Beijing's cooperation today. Arms sale might be the most crucial and sensitive issue in the U.S-China-Taiwan trilateral relationship. Taiwan should try hard to avoid the sales of F-16CDs to be the new U.S. administration's baseline. If, in the end, the U.S. side clearly informs Taiwan that it is impossible to offer to sell these fighter jets in the near future, this could set a precedent, which Beijing could use direct or indirect means to pinpoint a specific military item and influence Washington's discretion in the sale of that particular item. If this unfortunate outcome comes to surface, this would mean an irrevocable damage to Washington-Taipei relations and Taiwan's security. Politically, this means that these F-16CDs have been interpreted by Washington to be Beijing's redlines, even though Beijing might not be so specific; and Washington is willing to accommodate Beijing's concerns and delay the sale indefinitely. In the security sense, this means that Washington has demarked an invisible F-16CD grade threshold for its arms sales to Taiwan and future sales of any U.S. military equipment will fall below this invisible quality ceiling. Taipei should let Washington understand that a Taiwan with full self-defense capability will be free from backyard worries and become more confident in dealing and communicating with Mainland China to construct more stable cross-strait relations.